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# Understanding the implications of athlete brand among fans

Ali Hasaan<sup>1</sup>, Katri Kerem<sup>2</sup>, Rui Biscaia<sup>3,4</sup>, Kwame J.A. Agyemang<sup>5</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Estonian Business School, Tallinn, Estonia,

<sup>2</sup> Estonian Business School, , Tallinn, Estonia,

<sup>3</sup> Universidade Europeia, Lisbon, Portugal

<sup>4</sup> CIPER, Faculdade de Motricidade Humana, University of Lisbon, Portugal,

<sup>5</sup> School of Kinesiology, Louisiana State University, Louisiana , LA., USA.

## Abstract

The purpose of this study was to understand the implications of athlete brand among fans. Using a conceptual framework derived from a literature review as a starting point, a set of interviews was conducted with fans from three different countries in order to develop a better understanding of the role of athlete brand on fans' responses towards an athlete, and the associated teams and sponsors. The findings indicate that fans' responses towards an athlete include media following, creating their own narratives, positive word-of-mouth, and resistance to changing a favourite athlete. In addition, responses to the athlete's team include potential team substitution when the athlete is transferred, support for multiple teams and increased revenue generation. Finally, the sponsors of the athletes may also have benefits among fans including brand recognition, positive image, purchase intentions and ignoring rival sponsors. The implications of these findings for building and managing an athlete's brand are discussed, and directions for future studies are provided.

**Keywords:** Athlete Brand, Loyalty, Teams, Sponsors, Sports.

## 1. Introduction

The turn of the century brought technological changes that have helped to increase the intensity of what are referred to as winner-takes-all markets, and one of these winners is the star athlete [1]. Melnick and Jackson [2] state that athletes are public heroes and superstars because of their good performance at the international level helping them to achieve higher popularity and star status. That is why athletes are used as endorsers more often than any other celebrity [3]. In line

with these views many star athletes, such as David Beckham, Michael Jordan and Tiger Woods, have emerged and become powerful global brands with fans worldwide [4].

A human brand could be explained as any well-known persona in terms of marketing efforts, and celebrities (e.g. athletes) are types of human brands that possess additional associations and features of traditional brands [5]. Being a successful brand is advantageous in the sense that one's brand becomes an intangible asset [6]. This permits such individuals to achieve marketing accomplishments through the positive value attached to their names (i.e. honesty, dedication, brilliance) and represent great commercial potential [7]. For example, although renowned boxer Muhammad Ali retired decades ago, he still represents an example of a successful brand for fans worldwide. Therefore, the establishment of a brand is becoming a paramount aspect for athletes, as brand management for athletes tends to elicit a long-lasting, emotional attachment with their fans [8]. This emotional attachment is demonstrated by several present-day athlete brands. For example, footballer star Cristiano Ronaldo maintains more Facebook followers than anyone else in the world. Other examples include the economic impact of Cleveland Cavaliers' LeBron James on the city of Cleveland or the admiration of Hakeem Olajuwon of the Houston Rockets among the citizens of Houston [9]. Athletes who achieve the status of brands not only help themselves, but also tend to return the favour to their teams and sport. The cyclist Lance Armstrong, for instance, was of major importance in increasing the popularity of road cycling in the United States [10]. In addition, another direction of athlete brand is athlete effect on its sponsors. Over the past few decades, athlete endorsements have risen enormously and more ath-

letes are being selected as the face of brands [4]. McGhee [3] justified the selection of athletes as brand ambassadors as it enhanced their sales. In this respect, the agreement between Cristiano Ronaldo and Nike helped this sports brand to win the Asian market that was previously dominated by Adidas [11]. To summarize, when an athlete achieves the status of a brand, this brand may be valuable in three different directions: the athlete him or herself (i.e. more fans following and popularity, becoming a media celebrity), the team represented by the athlete (i.e. increases in popularity, gate money and merchandise sales), and athlete sponsors (i.e. increases in sales of products/services and more intentions to purchase in the future).

While previous studies have discussed the implications of athlete brand, there are yet to be qualitative studies that have examined the implications of athlete brand with an understanding of all the possible beneficiaries of athlete brand (athlete, team and sponsor). In light of previous literature, the current study was developed using a set of interviews with fans in order to develop a deeper understanding of the consequences of establishing an athlete brand for him/herself and its stakeholders (i.e. teams and sponsors). Therefore, the purpose of this study is to develop a deeper understanding of the role of establishing an athlete brand and how an athlete brand may impact fan responses toward the athlete, his/her team and associated sponsors. In doing so, this study attempts to provide a framework for helping athletes and brand managers in establishing a recognized brand, and therefore, enhancing the benefits of athlete branding.

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1 Athlete brand

Carter [12] explained that a personal brand is related to one's opinion about a particular individual. That is, an athlete brand could be explained as the personality of an individual athlete for the public [13]. Also, Montoya [14] explains that the process of establishing an athlete brand occurs through fan attachment to their favourite athlete, while Yu [15] mentioned that the link of a fan to a certain athlete depends upon the athletes' successful career and positive images of their personal

lives. Furthermore, Grant et al. [16] stated that football athletes become famous due to their on-field performance and off-field activities.

The establishment of a brand is important for athletes seen as star players due to the brand's enduring and profitable relationship with its customers [13]. Hausman and Leonard [17] found that NBA superstars such as Michael Jordan and Shaquille O'Neal have a large impact on TV ratings and game attendance. As a result, teams compete for the best athletes due to both their performance on the field and impact off the field. Kerr and Gladden [18] explained that star athletes have the ability to almost single-handedly develop brand equity for their clubs and enjoy almost cult-like status. Yang and colleagues [4] further stated that although the team's performance depends on the entire team, several fans tend to visit the stadium or watch games on TV because they are attracted by a star athlete. This is one of the reasons why companies often try to sponsor athletes, because it can enhance brand awareness among potential consumers [19].

### 2.2 Positive implications of athlete brand

Understanding the impact of branded athletes among fans is paramount due to its potential benefits in terms of increased loyalty towards the athlete him/herself [15], the athlete's team [20] and even the athlete's sponsors [3]. Loyalty can be described as an allegiance to a person or cause [19]. Similarly, fan loyalty refers to the level of emotional attachment an individual develops with a particular sport, team or athlete [21]. When focusing on athletes, being loyal to an athlete can be described as an individual's emotional attachment to a certain athlete leading him/her to develop a positive image about that athlete [13]. In this vein, Dwyer [22] noted that a loyal consumer displays intense behaviour and a strong, positive attitude toward a brand. For instance, the Cristiano Ronaldo presentation ceremony in Madrid comprised 80,000 fans in the stadium in addition to millions on TV screens worldwide [23].

Another benefit of athlete brand is related to the team in which the athlete plays. Due to attachment with the athlete, fans often develop an attachment with the athlete's team. That is, when fans are loy-

al to a particular athlete, they tend to support the associated team [18]. For instance, Real Madrid used David Beckham to earn the loyalty of Asian fans in the Far East and to sell shirts among local and international fans [15]. In addition, Neale and Funk [20] described athlete interest among fans as one of the major factors for increasing game day attendance. Brandes et al. [24] further noted that superstar presence in the team squad is a cause of increases in attendance for a team at both home and away matches. Athletes can also contribute to increasing the number of TV viewers, as several fans tend to watch matches because of a certain athlete as Kerr and Gladden [18] reported that Japanese television stations agreed to broadcast Spanish League games in Japan after David Beckham's transfer to Real Madrid. That is, a star athlete adds value to the team via his performance on the field and enhanced the popularity of the team as well.

In addition, in recent years athlete sponsorships have become ever-more common, as sponsors want to capitalize on well-known athlete brands in order to boost their product, brand and/or good that is sold to the public [15]. Dees et al. [21] suggest that there is a link between the fans, their favourite athlete and associated brands. Athletes seen as brands provide several important benefits over unknown sponsors, as they easily win viewers' attention [25]. Also, Rindova et al. [26] noted that a high level of public attention and positive emotional responses are obtained when some famous person is involved in marketing activities. This means that when athletes endorse a product or service, these branded products or services tend

to achieve public recognition and increased sales due to the athletes' own brand status.

All these studies have contributed to understanding the implications of athletes as brands. Still, there is lack of one comprehensive study focusing on the positive implications of athlete loyalty in a single model. Furthermore, it is important to develop a deeper understanding of how athlete loyalty, team loyalty and sponsor loyalty manifest among sport fans who follow their favourite athletes. Therefore, the current study adopts a conceptual framework based on a literature review as a starting point to develop a deeper understanding of the positive implications of athlete brand for the athlete himself/herself, as well as for his/her teams and sponsors (see Figure 1). The research questions guiding this study are as follows:

**RQ1:** How does an athlete brand contribute to fans' responses towards that athlete?

**RQ2:** How does an athlete brand contribute to fans' responses towards the athlete's team and its endorsers/sponsors?

### 3. Methodology

#### 3.1 Sampling of participants

A purposeful, convenience sample was employed to select our study participants. Patton [27] noted that criterion sampling is a type of purposeful sampling, which calls for participants to meet predetermined criteria for selection. For this study, participants had to meet the following criteria: 1) they must consider themselves a sports fan, 2) they

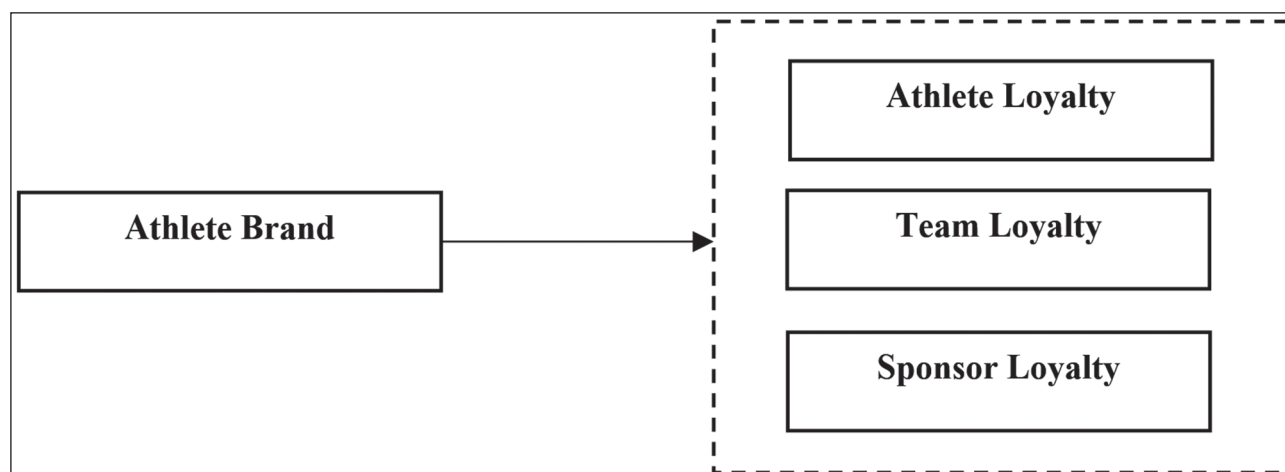


Figure 1. Implications of athlete brand based on the literature review

have at least one favourite athlete, 3) they have watched at least one game (live or through television) of their favourite athlete during the current season, and 4) they have been following this particular athlete for at least one year on various media channels (i.e. mass media, social media). All interviews were conducted by the lead researcher in settings preferred by the interviewees (e.g. the interviewee's office or a class room at the author's home institution for this specific purpose). The final sample comprised of 21 football fans from three different countries: a Baltic, Northern European nation (Estonia), a south western European nation (Portugal), and an Asian nation (Pakistan). The participants included both males and females and came from a diverse range of professions. The sample included participants that were just fans, as well as amateur and former players, which offered an especially interesting viewpoint to our study (See Table 1).

### 3.2 Data collection

Data were collected through a set of 21 interviews. All interviews were conducted during a

period of two months and were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. The participants were asked to sign a voluntary participation form that explained the purpose of the study and their acceptance to participate in the study.

A semi-structured interview guide was created in accordance with the interview guidelines proposed by Patton [27]. Through the interviews, we tried to cover the issues mentioned in the literature related to the implications of athlete brands among fans. Each interview consisted of questions about fan loyalty towards the athlete, loyalty towards the athletes' team, and loyalty towards the athlete's sponsor(s). For example, we asked: (1) Do you feel a connection with your favourite player? (2) Do you like the team in which your player is currently playing? (3) Are you more willing to buy the products of the brands that are sponsoring your favourite player?

### 3.3 Instrumentation

To achieve in-depth knowledge the researcher serves as an instrument to elicit the data. Probing questions were asked to extract more details [27].

*Table 1. Sample characteristics*

	Pseudonyms	Gender	Country	Profession
1	Anton	M	Estonia	Football player
2	Eha	F	Estonia	Lecturer
3	Edvin	M	Estonia	Commercial Director of football club
4	Heino	M	Estonia	Entrepreneur
5	Kadri	F	Estonia	PhD Researcher
6	Kalev	M	Estonia	Bank employee
7	Abdul	M	Pakistan	Mechanical Engineer
8	Tariq	M	Pakistan	Student
9	Adnan	M	Pakistan	Lecturer
10	Ibrahim	M	Pakistan	Student
11	Imran	M	Pakistan	IT-Specialist
12	Farooq	M	Pakistan	Salesman
13	Kashif	M	Pakistan	IT-Specialist
14	Zeeshan	M	Pakistan	Sports Journalist
15	Farid	M	Pakistan	Student
16	Awais	M	Pakistan	Marketing Manager
17	Shahid	M	Pakistan	Student
18	Fazal	M	Pakistan	IT-Specialist
19	Martim	M	Portugal	Scholar and sport journalist
20	Afonso	M	Portugal	Student
21	Dinis	M	Portugal	Student



For instance, real-life examples were often used in follow-up questions to gain more clarity about the participants' concepts and beliefs about certain athletes. The interview guide remained the same in its structure and sequence of questions for every interview. The interviews lasted from 15 to 40 minutes depending upon participant interest, and willingness to share his/her thoughts. For the sake of concealing their identities, we assigned pseudonyms to each of our participants (see Table 1).

*Back translation:* All participants selected in Estonia and Portugal had a solid understanding of the English Language, and therefore, the interviews were conducted in English. In turn, the Urdu language was adopted in Pakistan due to the difficulties in finding sports fans that had good English skills. To translate the questionnaire into Urdu, back translation was used to minimize discrepancies between the original instrument and the translated instrument. The questionnaire was first translated into Urdu by one of the researchers of the current study and then back-translated into English by two different professors who are proficient in both languages (i.e. English and Urdu). The comparison of the two forms made it clear that the two instruments were conceptually equivalent.

### 3.4 Data analysis

The data analysis was initiated after conducting the first interview as it permits researchers to become more familiar with the participants' responses [28]. The lead researcher listened to the interview and transcribed it verbatim. After converting the interview into written form, the lead author noted the first impressions of the interview. Next, the initial impressions of the interview were discussed with the other researchers. Through this process, the researchers were able to discuss how to improve subsequent interviews after each interview so that the research team could gain a better understanding and response from the participants.

There were two levels of coding adopted for the current study (i.e. the open coding level and the axial level). For the initial analysis, we employed open coding (i.e. "Breaking data apart and delineating concepts to stand for blocks of raw data"; [28, p.195]. Interview responses were read until data were completed understood. We discussed

preliminary themes originating from the first read of the data, and through this process we were able to select passages to determine emergent patterns. Once initial themes were recognized, we established it into more defined, concrete themes or in some cases, combined themes if they were similar and could not stand alone. Corbin and Strauss [28] defined this process as axial coding – the process of combining or relating the initial themes to one another. Axial coding helped to elaborate the result of this study from the initial themes.

The trustworthiness of the data analysis was assured through Patton's [27] guidelines for achieving trustworthiness in the study through credibility and dependability/ conformability. For the purpose of credibility and dependability, researchers with competence in the area of inquiry were part of the study. Furthermore, we did our best to provide all sorts of details about the research process to our participants. Peer-debriefing sessions were held to gain an outside perspective on the themes emerging from the data. We crosschecked that the participants' voices were being accurately portrayed through comparing written and recorded interviews by another researcher of the study. For the purpose of achieving conformability, during the interviews, the interviewer remained unbiased and never commented about their own opinion about certain matters or athletes.

## 4. Findings

The results of the interviews conducted with fans are presented in three parts. The first part of the interviews covered aspects related to fan loyalty towards the athletes. The second part focused on fan loyalty towards the athlete's team, while the third part is related to fan loyalty towards the athlete's sponsor(s). Overall, the findings are in line with previous studies and allow a deeper understanding of the model proposed in Figure 1. The results of the interviews are presented below and summarized in Table 2.

### 4.1 Athlete loyalty

Table 2 shows the participants' responses about their link with the favourite athlete highlighting five manifestations of athlete loyalty: media fol-

Table 2. Participants' discussion about the implications of athlete brand

Antecedent	Participants' responses
<b>Athlete Loyalty</b>	
Media following	"I have my mobile full of pictures of Cristiano Ronaldo, and I saved pictures from him wherever these pictures are posted: on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Newspaper" [Farid]
Own narratives	"I think Ronaldo has converted to Islam, but he did not declare it publically" [Abdul]
Positive WOM	"I usually mention to my friends that I follow Iniesta because of his example of humbleness, even knowing he wants to succeed" [Imran]
Creation of links	"I am a hard worker like Ronaldo though I have less success" [Fazal]
Resistance to change	
<b>Team Loyalty</b>	
Team substitution	"I was a Barcelona fan, but after Ronaldo's transfer I started to follow Real Madrid" [Anton/ Martim/ Abdul]
Support to multiple teams	"If Gerrard would move to Inter Milan I would start supporting them as well, although Liverpool would also be my favourite team" [Dinis]
Revenue generation	"I have a Barcelona scarf already, and I used to watch their matches on TV. Still, I would like to visit Barcelona to watch a live match in the stadium" [Kadri]
<b>Sponsor Loyalty</b>	
Brand recognition	"I remember Cristiano Ronaldo was the face of a Bank in Portugal. Although the bank almost closed, I still remember the name because of Ronaldo" [Afonso]
Positive image	"When my favourite athlete appears in a TV commercial, I have faith that he has tested that product himself" [Awais]
Purchase intentions	"If my favourite player is involved in marketing strategy from a brand, I would love to buy that product at least once" [Heino/ Afonso/ Tariql]
Ignoring rival sponsors	"Nobody in Portugal bought a Pepsi when the brand campaigned against Cristiano Ronaldo" [Martim].

lowing, own narratives, positive word-of-mouth (WOM), creation of links and resistance to change.

*Media Following:* Athlete loyalty seems to lead fans to know more about their favourite athlete, and as a result, fans tend to start following the athlete on social media platforms. In the current study, all 21 participants acknowledged they follow their favourite athlete. Also, once they recognize a certain athlete as their favourite, they start to follow him through different media platforms in order to know more and more. For example, one of the participants mentioned that:

I started to follow him when he was playing for Manchester United. After that, he kept working hard in Real Madrid. Last year he won the golden boot again. He has been among the top contenders for 'Ballon d'or' for many years and these reasons were my basis for following him through the media [Abdul].

Following an athlete through the media may also enhance a fan's perception of that athlete, given that social media brings fans and athlete closer. In this respect, two participants noted that:

Fans follow their favourite athlete on mass media and social media because they want to keep up to date about the player's activities. The other thing is they feel a connection with their favourite player when they interact through social media and mass media. It creates a psycho-social connection and with awareness they can relate daily life things with their favourite player, for example, when they go out to eat in some hotel they prefer the hotel where their favourite athlete dines, they know this hotel is their favourite player's favourite hotel as well [Zeeshan].

I read a lot about Messi. In future, I want to read books about Messi. I don't have a twitter account but I follow him on Facebook. I follow him on Facebook because it is easy to access [Anton]

*Own narratives:* The second aspect related to athlete loyalty and highlighted through the interviews is the fan's own narratives around the favourite athlete. Of the total sample, 20 participants in this study believe whatever good aspect related to their favourite athlete regardless of whether it might be the truth or a lie. Fans listened to unconfirmed pieces of information, started to believe good things from that and created new narratives

and stories according to their thoughts and their culture, while they also resist the idea of accepting bad things related to their athlete. For example, one of the participants mentioned that:

Messi is financing many children for the treatment of the same disease that Messi had when he was a child [Kashif].

Creating narratives is not only about good things or good stories. It is a vast field of trust and love that fans create according to their thoughts, their love and their passion for their favourite athlete. That is the utopic world of their favourite athlete where they start to believe everything good related to their favourite athlete, no matter whether they heard that story through a reliable source or it is just a rumour. In this respect, we present some stories below which our participants believe, but that are not in fact true:

He is basically Muslim, though he does not declare it publically, and he is not openly involved in charitable works but behind the scenes he is involved in many charity works [Abdul talking about Cristiano Ronaldo].

When it happened that Maradona hit the goal post three times, he requested the officials measure the length of the goal and it turned out that the goal was shorter than usual and the officials awarded three goals to his team. Maradona later commented, how is it possible that Maradona kicked the ball and it did not go into the goal? [Farooq talking about a rumour that is more often attributed to Pelé, the former Brazilian football player]

Furthermore, narratives seem to lead the fans to a world where turning negative news into positive stories is possible according. For example, two of the participants mentioned that:

I never believed in bad things related to Messi. As there was one story that he pushed a child who wanted Messi's autograph, I searched on the internet and came to know that later he apologized to that child and took pictures with him. So, instead of a bad feeling, I felt positive about Messi because he accepted his mistake, apologized and tried to pay for his mistake [Adnan].

Even fans of Luis Suarez would find some excuse for his biting habit, because it is impossible for fans to stop following their favourite players and they have excuses for everything their favourite player has done [Kashif].

*Positive word-of-mouth (WOM):* Fans not only appreciate their favourite athlete, but they also try to impose their choices upon others and engage in a campaign to advertise their favourite athlete. In the current study, 19 participants mentioned their habit of spreading positive things about their favourite athletes in daily communications with friends and in conversations about sport. They

suggested their favourite athlete to friends who are not attached to an athlete and mentioned examples about their favourite athlete in daily life so introducing that athlete even to those who do not have an interest in that sport or athlete yet. For example, two participants mentioned that:

I only speak about Ronaldo with my friends and all the stories I know about Ronaldo. When I tell others these stories I improvise a little bit and make them bigger than they actually are [Afonso].

In my own case I push a few of my office friends towards Messi loyalty, before that they were not interested in football. I quote examples about Messi wherever I can during my normal chats with friends [Kashif].

*Creation of Links:* Fans seem to relate everything to their favourite athlete and always try to create some kind of link between them and the athlete. They often start to live in a world that is built around their favourite athlete. They feel proud of that mutual property, and proudly tell others their link with the favourite athlete. In the current study, a total of 18 participants acknowledged that in order to keep close to the favourite athlete, they created some kind of link and tried to make a special connection with the athlete. For example, some participants mentioned that:

I am a hard worker like Ronaldo, but with less consistency and hunger for success [Fazal].

To some extent you can say, Passion. We both have the same interest. Football is the bonding between us [Abdul].

Ronaldo and I share attacking mind thinking [Tariq].

*Resistance to change:* The expression "once a fan, always a fan" seems to be appropriate to describe our participants. A total of 20 participants mentioned that once a favourite athlete is chosen, it is impossible to change unless the athlete retires or does something that is directly against one's beliefs. Otherwise, the fan always resists the idea to change their favourite athlete. As noted by some of the participants:

There is a possibility if you go against the values of fans you might lose loyalty. If I am a Luis Suárez fan how can I defend him in public when his action is against my cultural values [Martim].

Is it possible, but there are many levels of favourites. For example, my favourite player is Messi. It is impossible that I would stop liking him. But I have a few second best players. For example, Ronaldo and Marco Reus. These favourites could change if their performance dipped or bad off-field activities. If someone's top favourite is Suárez even his fans won't stop following him because of his biting habit though he might lose his fans because of changing clubs [Kashif].



Table 3. Participant's response highlighting the athlete and team relationship

Participant	Favourite player	Favourite Team	Opinion about the player and the team
Anton	Lionel Messi	Barcelona (Spain)	Liked Barcelona before Messi, and will follow both Barcelona and Messi in the new team if he leaves.
Eha	Manuel Neuer	Bayern Munich (Germany)	Likes both the player and the team. If Neuer moves to a team that she does not like, she will change her favourite player but in any case will follow Bayern.
Edvin	Will Hughes	Derby County (England)	Liked Derby County before, and will follow both Hughes and Derby County if Hughes leaves.
Heino	Gary Lineker	Everton (England)	Liked Everton before Lineker because of the team, and kept following both after his transfer.
Kadri	Lionel Messi	Atletico Madrid (Spain)	Likes Barcelona because of Messi, and will follow only Messi in case he changes team in the future.
Kalev	Cristiano Ronaldo	Real Madrid (Spain)	Likes both the player and the team, and will follow both Real Madrid and Ronaldo if Ronaldo leaves.
Abdul	Cristiano Ronaldo	Real Madrid (Spain)	Likes Real Madrid because of Ronaldo, and will follow only Ronaldo if he leaves.
Tariq	Cristiano Ronaldo	Real Madrid (Spain)	Likes Real Madrid because of Ronaldo, and will follow only Ronaldo if he leaves.
Adnan	Lionel Messi	Barcelona (Spain)	Likes Barcelona because of Messi, and will follow only Messi if he leaves.
Ibrahim	Lionel Messi	Barcelona (Spain)	Likes Barcelona because of Messi, and will follow only Messi if he leaves.
Imran	Andrés Iniesta	Barcelona (Spain)	Likes Barcelona because of Iniesta, and will follow both Iniesta and Barcelona if Iniesta leaves.
Farooq	Lionel Messi	Barcelona (Spain)	Likes both the player and the team, and will follow both Barcelona and Messi if he leaves.
Kashif	Lionel Messi	Barcelona (Spain)	Likes Barcelona because of Messi, and will follow both Barcelona and Messi if he leaves.
Zeeshan	Ryan Giggs	Manchester United (England)	Liked Manchester United before Giggs, and if Giggs had left Manchester United he would have followed both Manchester United and Giggs.
Farid	Cristiano Ronaldo	Real Madrid (Spain)	Likes Real Madrid because of Ronaldo, and will follow only Ronaldo if he leaves.
Awais	Cristiano Ronaldo	Real Madrid (Spain)	Likes Real Madrid because of Ronaldo, and will follow only Ronaldo if he leaves.
Shahid	Lionel Messi	Barcelona (Spain)	Likes Barcelona because of Messi, and will follow only Messi if he leaves.
Fazal	Cristiano Ronaldo	Manchester United (England)	Likes Real Madrid because of Ronaldo, and was a former supporter of Manchester United. Now, he follows Ronaldo, Real Madrid and Manchester United.
Martim	Cristiano Ronaldo	Real Madrid (Spain)	Likes Real Madrid because of Ronaldo, and will follow only Ronaldo if he leaves.
Afonso	Cristiano Ronaldo	Sporting Lisbon (Portugal)	Likes Ronaldo because of Sporting Lisbon, and has been following Ronaldo and his teams while still being a fan of Sporting Lisbon as well.
Dinis	Steven Gerard	Liverpool (England)	Liked Liverpool before Gerard, and will follow both Liverpool and Gerrard if he leaves.

## 4.2 Team loyalty

A deeper understanding of aspects related to fan loyalty towards the team of their favourite athlete is presented through Table 3. The participants' responses indicate that team loyalty manifests through aspects such as team substitution, support for multiple teams and revenue generation.

*Team Substitution:* It was always a thought that teams come first and players come and go. Nevertheless, the results of the current study highlight that most participants started to like a certain team because of their favourite athlete. The participants acknowledged the role of the athlete as being superior to the team, and they accepted that they would change their loyalty to another team because of a transfer of their favourite athlete. In some cases, they did not even like that specific team before their athlete arrived. Furthermore, some participants doubt that they would stick to their current team if their favourite athlete transferred to another team. A few examples of this idea are presented below:

I liked Barcelona in the Spanish League. But now, because of Ronaldo, I started to like Real Madrid while they gradually raise their aggressiveness and slandered in the game as well [Abdul].

My favourite team is Real Madrid because of Cristiano Ronaldo and Mourinho [Martim].

If Steven Gerard moves to Inter, of course I will follow him there [Dinis].

*Support for multiple teams:* Athletes help the teams they represent to increase the number of fans, as fans tend to show commitment to an athlete's team as well. In the current study, a total of 15 participants noted that if they were unable to transfer their allegiance to another team with an athlete's transfer, they would start to follow them as second favourite team. Fans tend to have a favourite player in every league and they often watch and support multiple teams because of those athletes (see Table 3 for team-athlete relations). For example, two participants noted that:

In Portugal, I like Sporting, but in Spain my favourite team is Real Madrid because of Ronaldo [Afonso].

Fans who are more attached to teams always stay loyal to their favourite team, and when player's change team instead of shifting their loyalty towards the new team they stay loyal to their favourite team. However, they started to remain in touch with the players' new team. For instance, when Cristiano Ronaldo moved to Real Madrid, fans of Ronaldo started to follow Real Madrid. But, on other hand, neither Ronaldo nor his fans dismissed Manchester United. Both have a soft corner for United because they know it was

Manchester United that was the former home of Ronaldo. But off course, the past is past so they become loyal to Real Madrid. Loyal fans of Manchester United remained die-hard fans of Manchester United, but in same time they started to get regular updates about Real Madrid and started to support Real Madrid in La Liga [Imran].

*Revenue Generation:* While helping the team to increase its fan base and success on the field, important athletes also contribute to improving the team's financial performance. In the current study, a total of 20 participants mentioned actions thought to indirectly favour the economics of the athlete's team including purchasing the athlete's jersey or asking the cable operator to tune in TV channels that broadcast live matches of the team. Below, we present the ideas of two participants that highlighted the influence of an athlete on the team's economic conditions through revenue generation:

That is the case in Asia with Cristiano Ronaldo when he moved to Real Madrid. Cristiano Ronaldo sold 1.5 million Real Madrid shirts alone with his name printed. Each shirt cost almost €70. So, his transfer paid through shirt sale. And there are indirect benefits as well. For example, many pay-per view TV programs related with Real Madrid were sold because of Cristiano Ronaldo. All Bayern Munich players sold 1 million shirts in total, and Cristiano Ronaldo sold 1.5 million alone. The team success because of his play is just a bonus for Real Madrid [Martim].

People start to buy more season tickets just because a good player was coming. I think that when Real Madrid bought Ronaldo's pass, it made more people follow the team on every media and they immediately sold thousands of shirts of Ronaldo around the world [Kalev].

## 4.3 Sponsor loyalty

The participants' responses about the athlete's sponsors indicate that these sponsors can also benefit through brand recognition, positive image, and increased intentions among the fans to purchase products or services and to ignore rival sponsors.

*Brand recognition:* All the participants in this study correctly recognized the brands sponsoring his/her favourite athletes, which is a paramount aspect for the brands engaged with professional athletes. Even when the fans do not intend to buy the products of the sponsors, they still recognize the brand sponsoring their favourite athlete. As noted by one of the participants:

Currently, Manuel Neuer is in the Coca Cola Zero or Light commercial [Eha].

Ronaldo was the face of a bank, although the bank has closed but I still remember that bank [Afonso].

*Positive image:* When a fan's favourite athlete is advertising some sort of brand, it creates a positive image in the minds of the fans and they develop a positive image about that brand. A total of 20 participants in the current study reported that when their favourite athlete is involved in an advertisement, they tend to have positive feelings about the endorser. Furthermore, when their favourite athlete is the 'face of the brand', they tend to have positive feelings about the brand and consider this brand as being better than rival brands.

There are many people I know who have a positive idea about the brands endorsing their favourite athletes and they love to buy everything related with their favourite player [Afonso].

If Ronaldo wears Nike, it means Nike is better than Adidas and other sporting brands automatically [Abdul].

*Intention to purchase:* During the interviews, eight participants claimed that they have already bought something related to their favourite athlete. It is also important to note the positive element discovered among the participants that they develop favourable intentions towards the sponsors of their favourite athlete, as 16 participants showed the intention to purchase athlete related items. The participant's responses suggest that when their favourite athlete advertises some product they will consider the product in future purchases. As noted by two of the participants in this study:

I myself bought 'clear' shampoo when Ronaldo was in the commercial for that product [Tariq].

For example, if a player started to wear Puma instead of Nike, in my opinion, his fans will notice that change and they will start to buy Puma [Edvin].

I already bought a shirt by Nike, the sponsor of my favourite player, Cristiano Ronaldo, and I hope to buy Nike shoes as well [Farid].

*Ignoring rival sponsors:* Findings also suggest that fans have such a strong allegiance to their favourite athlete that they deny everything that occurs against their favourite athlete. This allegiance is not only tied to the favourite athlete, but everything related with the athlete (i.e., sponsors, teams). In line with this view, a total of 11 of our participants acknowledged that they try their best to avoid rival teams and brands associated with other players. A good example is the case of PEPSI's advertisement when the company launched a campaign against Cristiano Ronaldo before a game between Sweden and Portugal. In this respect, one of the participants said that:

For instance, do you remember the PEPSI advertisement that trashed Cristiano Ronaldo as some Swedish guy put Swedish flag knocking out Cristiano Ronaldo. They had to pay five hundred thousand euros to apologize. No one in Portugal bought PEPSI because of that. PEPSI had a huge problem in Portugal as no one wanted to buy PEPSI so they had to pay Ronaldo and try to show everything is fine now in order to get things back again [Martim].

## 5. Discussion

The current study focused on the implications of athlete brands in terms of fan perceptions about the athlete him/herself, the teams represented by the athlete, and his/her sponsors. The main goal was to gather the fans' opinions in order to provide a deeper understanding of the positive implications the athlete brand has for the actual athlete, his/her team and associated sponsors. This study contributes to the literature by (1) combining different ideas from past studies into a single model about the consequences of the athlete brand, and (2) providing a more comprehensive framework to aid scholars and practitioners on the dimensions they should work on to promote the benefits of athlete branding. The findings from this study are summarized in Figure 2 allowing a better understanding of the benefits of athlete brands.

The dimension of athlete loyalty was further categorized through five sub-dimensions: media following, own narratives, positive WOM, creation of links, and resistance to change. In regard to the first sub-dimension, this means fans tend to follow their favourite athletes on different media channels. This is in line with Frederick et al. [29], who mention that loyal fans follow their favourite athlete on different media channels to increase interpersonal closeness based on the interaction with their favourite athlete. The second sub-dimension indicates that fans tend to create their own narratives based upon their experiences and true or false stories or rumours they hear about the favourite athlete. Dubois et al. [30] stated that people start believing in positive rumours and stories and neglect bad things about their favourite brand when they have certainty in their beliefs about their favourite brand, while Grant et al. [16] refer to this process as fans' creating their own narratives. We found that fans not only create narratives about their favourite athletes, but also transfer true

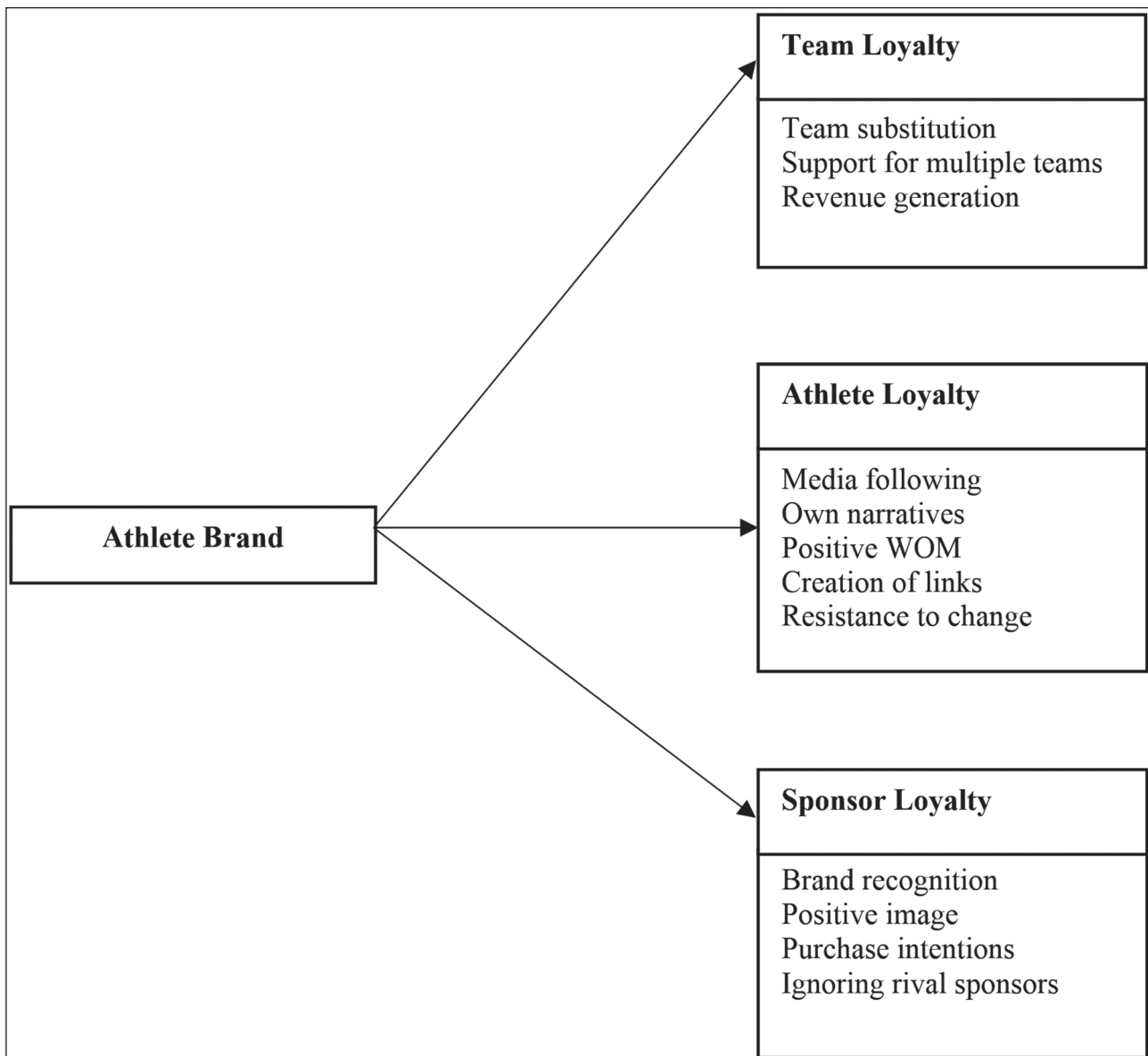


Figure 2. Final framework of the positive implications of athlete brand after participant interview

or false stories to others (potential fans) through positive WOM. This is consistent with the conclusions from Bush et al. [31] mentioning that young women spread positive WOM regarding their favourite athlete. Furthermore, the findings suggest that fans create a link with the athlete that is based upon some common ground and they connect themselves with their favourite athlete in a positive manner through that link. Fink et al. [32] explained that highly identified fans see the team as a reflection of themselves, and the same seems to be the case here about individual athletes. The last sub-dimension of athlete loyalty is resistance to change the favourite athlete. This aspect highlights that loyal fans tend to resist the idea of changing

their favourite athlete even when the athlete is not in good shape [20].

The role of the athlete brand on team loyalty allowed us to identify three sub-dimensions: team substitution, support for multiple teams and revenue generation. This means that when a fan likes an athlete, he/she tends to follow the team in which the athlete plays. In some cases, the fans can change their favourite team due to the athlete's presence in a certain team, and this situation leads to supporting multiple teams. For example, when a fan's favourite athlete moves to another team, the fan may start to have more than one favourite team (i.e., fans start to follow both the former and the new team of favourite athlete) and this often becomes a source



of revenue generation for those teams through merchandise sales, TV viewership and stadium visits. In regard to the first sub-dimension, the idea of team substitution is in line with Yu [15], who mentions that athletes often have the power to win the loyalty of fans for the team he/she represents. For instance, David Beckham's transfer to Real Madrid caused a substantial increase in the total number of Asian fans for Real Madrid [33]. On the other hand, the concept of support for multiple teams in this study emerged because fans tend to follow different teams associated with the athlete, which is in line with McDonald et al. [34], who indicate that fans do not stick to a single team. Instead, they follow multiple teams even in the same sport as mentioned by some of our participants. Fans' responses also indicate the role of athlete brand on revenue generation for the team. In this respect, Vincent et al. [33] noted that David Beckham's transfer to Los Angeles Galaxy allowed an increase in the benefits for the team (i.e. increased gate money, sponsorship deals, TV rights, as well as improved performance on the field). Also, Yang and Shi [5] state that star athletes are often profitable, as their fans watch their games, wear their jerseys, follow their news, and purchase the products they have endorsed. Based on this study's findings, large expenditures on top athletes seems to be justified for the club managers (e.g. Manchester City, PSG or Real Madrid). On one hand, the athletes help to increase gate revenue for the teams they represent. On the other hand, they contribute to increased loyalty towards the team.

The third positive implications regarding athlete brand concerns fan loyalty towards the sponsors that are associated with the athlete. These positive implications are related to sponsor brand recognition, increased image of the sponsor, purchase intentions and ignoring rival sponsors. The results indicate that fans commonly recognize the brands associated with their favourite athlete, which is consistent with the idea that when an athlete endorses some brand, the ability of fans to recognize the brand effectively increases [25]. In addition, fans tend to develop a positive image about the brand due to its association with the favourite athlete. This is a very important aspect given that fans' favourable opinions about sponsors are often important to enhance their willingness to engage in purchase behaviours towards the

sponsor products [19]. In fact, positive purchase intentions towards the athlete's sponsors was another aspect highlighted by the participants of this study. Support for this finding is also provided by Charbonneau et al. [25], as the authors noted the power of celebrity athletes to influence the purchase intentions of fans. Lastly, the findings of this study highlight that fans even tend to avoid brands associated with rival teams or athletes. This is of paramount importance and suggests that the sponsoring brands obtain benefits through an increase in fan willingness to purchase its products or services, as well as the elimination of rival brands from the fans evoked set.

The current study highlights the importance of achieving 'brand status' for athletes. Fan responses suggest when an athlete successfully becomes a brand, this situation tends to generate benefits for the athlete him/herself. The creation of a brand is important to ensure that an athlete won't lose the support of the fans even in difficult moments (e.g. bad performance or immoral personal activity). In some cases, this scenario even helps an athlete to become a celebrity leading him/her to emerge as a 'real life hero'. For instance, Didier Drogba, a famous footballer used his status to play an influential role in bringing peace to the Ivory Coast during the civil war [35]. In addition, athletes that have established themselves as a brand tend to have a beneficial role on their teams, as they help to increase team supporters and to persuade fans to spend more money related to game day attendance and other team-related services. Furthermore, branded athletes also tend to provide an important contribution for their sponsors, as fans tend to respond positively to the brands sponsoring their favourite athletes. In summary, the current study aimed to provide a better understanding of the implications of athlete brand according to fan perceptions. For that purpose, we conducted interviews with fans in three different countries to obtain a variety of responses and allowing for a better understanding of the concept. We found that athlete brands have the potential to have a positive impact on fan loyalty towards the athlete him/herself (through media, own narratives, positive WOM, creation of links and resistance to change), the team(s) where the athlete plays (through team substitution, support for multiple teams and revenue generation) and the



sponsors associated with the athlete (through brand recognition, positive image, purchase intention and ignoring rival brands).

## 6. Limitations and future directions

The current study is intended to represent a springboard for future studies, and therefore, limitations and future research suggestions are now provided. First, while the current study includes a sample of fans from three different countries, other resources involving sample collection and selection could bring more detailed results. That is, future research should collect larger volumes of data using fans from different cultural backgrounds, as previous studies suggest that consumer opinions about brands are culturally sensitive [19]. Furthermore, even though qualitative data provides an in-depth understanding of this topic, future studies could employ quantitative methods in order to provide further support for these findings with a larger sample of sports fans.

A second limitation and research opportunity may be related to case studies. That is, while this study was not designed for a specific athlete, it is also important to conduct studies based upon individual athletes commonly recognized as strong brands with global impact (e.g. Cristiano Ronaldo or Messi – football; LeBron James – basketball; Floyd Mayweather or Manny Pacquiao – boxing; Roger Federer – Tennis). Further, multi-sport fans in a single study (i.e. fans of cricket players, fans of football players), can offer a better understanding of such sports. Furthermore, more diversity could be achieved via data collection for specific female athletes (e.g. Maria Sharapova or Serena Williams – Tennis). These types of studies could provide more strength to the study of athlete brand by identifying common factors in fans around the world regarding the selection of a favourite athlete.

Moreover, a stronger focus on aspects such as ‘second favourite athlete’ or ‘like multiple teams’ would represent an important contribution to both the sport management literature and practitioners working directly with star athletes. This is because the current study illustrated that most fans have a tendency to follow more than one team. Also, the current study suggests that fans not only have a second favourite team but a second favourite ath-

lete in some cases. In this sense, it would be interesting to conduct a study about second best players of the game (e.g. football athletes apart from Cristiano Ronaldo and Lionel Messi).

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Corresponding Author  
 Ali Hasaan,  
 Estonian Business School,  
 Tallinn,  
 Estonia,  
 E-mail: aili\_hasaan@hotmail.com